Robert B. Shaw

Fountain Pen Poetry

The other day I went into an office supply store and asked where I might find a bottle of ink. The young woman at the register, glad to have an excuse for a walk, led me to a remote area and pointed me toward a bottle of India ink. She must have taken me for a calligrapher. No, I explained, that wasn't what I meant; and I scanned the shelves, finally locating a dusty bottle or two of the sort of black ink I use in my fountain pen. I purchased one of these with the sort of relief that differently retrograde people feel when they succeed in buying typewriter ribbons. The thought of changing a comfortable habit in response to necessity, always disquieting, could be put aside at least one more time.

Still, qualms persist. The bottles I have bought the last few times are not those I remember from childhood. The older design featured an interior ink well—a glass trough or pocket snug at the rim on one side of the bottle. One could tilt the bottle before uncapping it and have a convenient amount of ink to siphon up without needing to plumb the depths. Evidently whoever now makes ink bottles has decided that the extra bit of glass and the extra production step of each little annealing threaten the bottom line. Will the bottle itself, made of something as antique as glass, be streamlined before much longer out of existence?

A bottle of ink lasts me a long time. The main reason for this is that I use my fountain pen almost exclusively to write poems, and life being as it is, that is a fairly small portion of the writing I do. Correcting student papers, filling out forms, drafting reviews or an essay like this one—all these are ballpoint or felt-tip or roller-ball chores, capable of being done with a lesser degree of ceremony. While it is not literally true that I can write verse only with a fountain pen—I have, like most poets, now and then jotted some

lines with a Bic on the back of an envelope while riding a bus—it is far and away my preferred method. Only recently, perhaps because of the sort of shopping experience described above, have I begun to wonder why I got into this way of doing things.

When I tell my students that I write poems with a fountain pen, they look at me pretty much as though I had confessed to using a goose quill. And of course there is nothing that much amiss with their sense of chronology. Fountain pens were undoubtedly losing out to ballpoints in the years after World War II, when I was growing up. I suppose my father had a fountain pen, but I do not remember him writing with it. Much of the advertising copy he wrote for a living went straight from his head to the typewriter. When he drafted something in a slower way it was often with a mechanical pencil that as a child I found fascinating, though it was too closely tied to his work for me to covet it. It had leads of at least three colors: black, red, and green, and there may also have been a blue one. Its silvery shaft was studded with little ridged protuberances, each of which when slid down would click the desired color of lead into place. I never could understand—still don't—how it worked. It looked too narrow for the traffic inside it, and it seemed that any one of the leads would have to bend like a straw to get past the others. This beguiling instrument dropped out of sight after a few years. (Talk about obsolescence: how easy it could it have been, as the Fifties gave way to the Sixties, to find red or green pencil leads?) My father moved on to ballpoint.

It must have been my grandparents, then, who furnished me the model for fountain pen use. Analyzing this now, it seems to me that even early on I was attracted to old-fashioned ways of doing things—or at least to the placid authority with which my grandparents went about their business. Perhaps even then I was trying to hold on to a small corner of their world, which by now has almost entirely slipped away.

My grandfather, a minister, and his wife, a tireless letter writer, both filled and emptied pens at a great rate. These were my mother's parents: during the housing shortage after the war, we lived with them until I was four and just beginning to write (or, more likely, draw). The desk with its ink bottle, pens, and blotter, which I could work on if I knelt on the desk chair, was grownup territory, and somehow the siphoning up and letting go of ink in lines or letters seemed a thing of some moment. I suppose it was exactly that, since I was closely supervised. For all her copious use of it, my grandmother had a horror of what she called "loose ink." There must have been some catastrophe in the past—a cat jumping up at the wrong moment, or the like—that gave rise to this. The ink she bought was always labeled "washable," though this turned out to mean washable-in-a-manner-of-speaking. (As far as truth-in-labeling is concerned, the ink I now use to write poems is called "permanent," but often when I am refilling my pen I find myself thinking that the lines I have just been laboring over are anything but.) With someone stationed behind me and with the bottle safely capped, I drew my page of outsider art and shakily printed my name on it in lines of black excitingly so much darker than I could make with a pencil. There was power in the bottle. I don't recall exactly when I first heard the phrase "the genie in the bottle," but it was well before drinking age, and what I thought of was an ink bottle containing some impounded unruly spirit. It was probably just as well that I didn't share this fantasy with my grandmother.

My practice of bifurcation—the fountain pen for creative things, other writing tools for things more workaday—grew naturally, reinforced by a number of factors. Although at an early age I was given a fountain pen (or maybe commandeered an abandoned one I found in a drawer), I took pencils and, in due course, ballpoints with me to school—no loose ink there. In one of my schools the older desks had ink wells built in, and I liked to imagine the children of several decades back, dressed in their pathetic

clothes—pinafores for the girls, knickers for the boys—dutifully dipping their even more archaic, bladderless pens. But there was no way to emulate these predecessors: the wells were bone-dry. Much later, in graduate school, I tried for a while to break down the barrier by carrying a fountain pen and using it for tasks less rarefied than writing verse. But I gave this up after an occasion when it sprang a leak in my pocket. After that it stayed home, confirmed all the more as the implement of choice whenever I had time to work on poems.

Is it just a mild bit of ancestor worship to continue to use my grandparents' technology of writing? Certainly that must play a part, but there is more to it. For me, to pick up the fountain pen, to put aside the yellow legal pad and settle down to a sheet of lucent white bond of a decent weight—this is, in a modest way, to initiate a ritual. I intend nothing as imposing as charming myself into writing, as Yeats would say, as if I had a sword upstairs. But a tangible break from the more routine sorts of writing has come to seem helpful in getting started. Then, too, there is something about the tactile experience of writing in this way that seems right for what I am trying to set down. None of the alternatives is as appealing. Pencil is ugly whether crossed out or erased, and makes anything look like a grocery list. Even the smoothest ballpoint goes a bit grainily over the paper, and writing is slow enough without being dogged by additional friction. I dislike, too, the lack of variation in the thickness—or one might better say the thinness—of the ballpoint's lines. Not having been formed by a flexing nib, what is spelled out looks unspringy and anemic, and seems to sell words short.

What about typing, or as we say nowadays, "the keyboard"? The musical overtone in that is ironic. It is admittedly not as noisy as it used to be; but even the computer lets out, if not the machine-gun rat-tat-tat of my youth, its own sinister concerto of insectile clicks. And there is again the matter of pace. If ballpoints are too slow, then clearly and conversely, typing is too fast. The flittering of so many fingers seems to tug thought to move ahead, whereas

in writing poetry one wants thought to linger as need be and look around in whatever direction the case requires. Meditation moves at the pace of the pen—my pen, at any rate. Even if I should eventually choose to skim rapidly over a detail, the opportunity first to dwell on it can be valuable. The disadvantage of facile speed pertains not only to writing the poem but to revising it. I do, of course, eventually type a copy of what I am working on, but I continue to make corrections in ink until the manuscript is readied for sending somewhere. There is something bracingly cautionary for me in being able to look back at successive drafts and to see the bêtises I have managed to save myself from. I might feel less responsible for my lapses if they were expunged from the record before they ever hit paper. And I might eventually come to believe, with no visible evidence to the contrary, that my lines came fully formed and burnished the first time round: a dangerous illusion for any writer to entertain. A true manuscript, for me, is one that illustrates what Pope called "the last and greatest art, the art to blot."

Hence the allure of blottable ink. I like the faint hint of danger, in that the ink I use nowadays does not profess to be washable, and I like the flash the wet cursive segments give off before wedding themselves fully to the paper or yielding their more volatile components to the air. I like the thinning and thickening of the letters as the nib apportions ink in lines straight or curving. I like the balanced weight of the pen, and the illusion, when writing is going well, that it is following the flow of ink rather than meting it out. And I like the black-on-white definiteness of the poem on the page, which even in the first, most tentative draft shows itself for an act, a mark made on the void, a breaking of silence. Some of this language may sound erotic, or mystical, or both; but the writing of poetry provides intensities and satisfactions that are peculiarly its own. The balance of work and play that goes into it, as into any true art, is distinct from that which one obtains in sensual or spiritual activities. Line after black line, the poem sustains on the page an exacting equilibrium, not only of the work

and play that go into its making, but of the flesh and spirit that authorize the endeavor. Again, I go back, as if to an emblem, to the balance of the pen in the hand, to the finely adjusted weight of its purposeful inclination as it sets down a line of verse.

It is time (perhaps it was time some paragraphs back) to enter a disclaimer. What I am writing is an account of my personal predilections, not a prescription for other poets. I have no doubt that excellent poems can be written by a variety of implements. True, Randall Jarrell put his incisive finger on something when he complained of poems that appear to have been written "on a typewriter by a typewriter." Still, the poems of Cummings, Williams, and Moore would scarcely have come to pass with the typewriter, and I have known poets devoted to No. 2 pencils as well as numerous others who are just as happy to write with whatever is at hand. When interviewers for the late, lamented Paris Review queried authors about their scribal habits, no consensus was apparent. I could not hope to persuade a disinterested observer that my penchant for fountain pens is anything but a foible. And yet, what is the appeal in subjecting our behavior, or that of the world around us, to literalistic interpretations alone? My penchant may as well become a pen chant. My writing habits seem most meaningful to me as an enacted metaphor for the kind of poetry I persist in trying to write. I suppose some hint of Classicism hovers in the background here, as it tends to do whenever one speaks of "balance," but that seems too grand a label for what I am busy at making. Call it, if you like, fountain pen poetry. Whatever you might mean by that, I would take it to mean a poetry observant of certain traditional values of style and technique, that takes form on the page as something made by hand before my eyes. It takes a minute for the ink to dry and in its shimmer it seems at once separate and not separate from me. It is subject to correction, many times over. This certainly sounds highly controlled, and up to a point, it should be. But an element of risk, I would insist, comes into it as well. Every time I fill my

pen, or in a measured way discharge it on the page, I feel the pent presence of the genie in the bottle, and I know that some of what I write will surprise and disturb me as much as life does.

The Children

The children scream. It is hard to believe,
but you can hear them over the harsh racket
of that old wooden roller coaster sounding
ready to shake itself to splinters, shooting
carloads of children up, around, and down.
Or: From the back row of the movie house,
between gulps of Coke, they more than match
screams of the overpaid, defenseless starlet
coming face to face with the living dead.
Or: As they scoot through the pedestrian
tunnel's bottleneck to the raucous beach,
they let the shrillest lung-powered missiles loose
to ricochet off shadowy, dank walls—
echoes besting the road-roar overhead.
All this provides them practice. Now they scream
to juice up the backyard birthday party.
Sweating and itching in a polyester
clown suit, a high school boy blows up
balloons for them; his made-up funny face
has the usual look of a lipsticked skull.
A plane drops low, trailing its routine drumroll.
The children, sugar-saturated, scream
until the neighbors slam their windows down.
Bang! More bangs. Balloons become barrage.
The grass is soon covered with moist scraps
of rubbery pink, and even now the children
scream and if you close your eyes you might
forget the roller coaster's safety bar,
the celluloid contrivance of the film,
the happy family's covey of protection
moving unconcerned through the gray tunnel,
the plane aligned calm for a clear runway.
There, in your own darkness behind your eyes,
treble piercing the underpinning bass,
you might hear the mess of noise stripped bare

of reassuring context, hear the screams
as helpless commentary on what Mister
Chalky Face is ready to hand out
with a fixed grin to children of all ages.

Working Out: Ten Epigrams

Motivation

Mens sana in *corpore sano* might
be every bit as true as it is trite,
but what can spur the sedentary will
recurrently to gulp the bitter pill
of sane exertion? Doctor's orders. Fright.

Trainer

Hannah can see that I am too ethereal.
Her regimens are thoughtfully designed
to keep me focused on the raw material
that for so long had somehow slipped my mind.

*

Treadmill

A line from Hopkins trundles through my head:
"Generations have trod, have trod, have trod."
To keep alive I mime the trooping dead.
Ten minutes more must go to this sheer plod.

*

Rower

Charon, your moldy prow is faintly showing
on the horizon; in my dry-docked craft
I pull against an unseen current, knowing
there is no knowing just when you'll swing aft.

Pullups

My two arms dragging up the rest of me
are painfully apprised of gravity.

*

Situps

My brain says I should do five more now, but
a differing opinion fills my gut.

*

Bench Press

Peculiar, upward thrusting: like inverted
pushups, or attempting to get rid
of a blithe Saint Bernard. Or, disconcerted,
coaxing aloft a lowering coffin lid.

*

Attention-Getter

His clanking on of fifty extra pounds
is followed by a train of ardent sounds,
each beefy heave accompanied by grunts
which fail to charm us less ambitious runts.

*

Role Model

Past eighty-seven, at a queenly pace,
she gets her money's worth out of the place,
bestowing on each Nautilus machine,
to the mind's eye, an opalescent sheen.

Locker Room

So: am I still committed? All the more so;
what if each sinew creaks from recent strife?
A glance at this or that archaic torso
reminds me I had better change my life.

In The Picture

The M.D., as it says on his neat sign,
is neatly specialized. He treats The Hand.
Professionally caressing one of mine,
he doesn't hesitate to reach the point
in terms that even I can understand:
"You have arthritis in your left thumb joint."

He caught it on the X-ray. There it shows,
right where it shouldn't be, the site of pain
between two chalk-pegs, passing out the woes
just taking hold of things can leave me feeling.
What is it like? Annoying. Like a sprain
that re-emerges fresh from every healing.

For all of that, the pain's not often serious,
not halfway up his scale of one to ten,
I tell him, peering at the splayed, mysterious
image of my extremity fluoresced
against a field of darkness. (Now and then,
maybe, it hits a six.) Well, who'd have guessed

this would be where the first outbreak would come?
Never left-handed, I've demanded little
of this inflamed, opposable, sore thumb,
would even pay to have these flare-ups cease.
But any truce in such a spot is brittle.
Unfazed by film, aching to breach the peace,

this will persist. It could intensify,
exporting discontent to other zones.
The doctor of The Hand will have a try,
then hand me to a different specialist.

Meanwhile, in that precinct between bones,
resentment churns each time I make a fist.

River and Road

Four days a week and sometimes five
I take my make-my-living drive
along a road I know too well.
For several miles, parallel
to mine, a river steers its course,
moving with unassuming force,
tugging its ripple-convoy south,
aiming to catch up with its mouth.
Till at a bridge we intersect
we each, in different ways, reflect:
I mull on all I need to do
while it absorbs the local view.
Absorbs? Well, no. Its surface proffers
back every sight each instant offers.
Leaves flutter from a lowdown limb
not only near but on the brim.
Glance up or down: the doubled sky
confounds a sense of low and high.
Each cloud flotilla setting sail
rates an escort in mirrored mail;
and, in the midst of all, the sun's
photons arouse rebounding ones.

If the road tended closer in
the water might display my twin,
but ferried on by asphalt, I'm
oblivious to it for the time.
Crossing from bank to bank, I go
my way and leave it to its flow.
What comes to pass upon its face
jars not a bit the river's pace.

And this goes on for days, for years.
As though through its own mist of tears

it gives the world back with a wink.
In me, though, such impressions sink
abeyant to a rambling grotto
(Room For It All might be its motto),
waiting spellbound or simply parked
for days or decades unremarked
till, surging from the silt to break
the placid surface with their wake
they win the notice I'd withheld
before. I let our currents meld,
returning buoyancy and sheen
to a long disregarded scene
now entertained in full and made
part of my conscious cavalcade—
with such a feeling, maybe, as
the steady-running river has
when it arrives to meet the sea
and finds a mightier harmony.
And, so it won't drop out of sight
once more, I take my pen and write.

Old Man of the Mountain

Charisma shaped his overhanging ledge,
made him iconic, heading him toward fame.
Eons on Cannon Mountain's windy edge
earned him his name.

After untold millennia, who counts?
That bare peak was his post. He stayed to man it,
staring at air and eagles, other mounts
made too of granite:

the constant sentinel who stole the scene.
His beetling brow, his massive lantern jaw,
his knife-edge nose protruding in between
indifferently cast awe

on the first scouts who pioneered the Notch,
tiptoeing past the shade of that profile.
Then followed tourist hordes to watch him watch,
with no hint of a smile,

the forests turn to farms, the straighter road
reform the ragged, snaking Indian trail.
None of these changes seemed much to forebode
a finis to his tale,

since none could change his vigil over change.
Then, one night, a vibration shook the spell.
Loosed from his lookout, leaving it vacant, strange,
his face fell.

Loss by a landslide made a sad enough
end to the reign of this New England sphinx;
sadder, to know his pose was one great bluff
riddled with chinks.

Single File

It is your destiny to stand in line:
some, as it happens, are ahead of you.
However you may question the design,

this is the way it has to be. Don't whine.
Don't bother cursing that bad hand you drew.
It is your destiny to stand in line,

barred from all decent pretexts to resign.
You're here, you're late. While itching to squeeze through,
however, you may question the design:

Will it be worth the wait? That glass of wine?
That corner table with an ocean view?
It is your destiny. To stand in line

to have your passport stamped, your blood drawn, dine
deluxe or at some diner, this you do
however you may question. The design

is snarled in the future's ball of twine,
trailing an end you catch at for a clue.
It is your destiny to stand in line—
how? Ever. (You may question the design.)

Robert B. Shaw teaches at Mount Holyoke College. His most recent books, both published by Ohio University Press, are a collection of poems, *Solving For X*, and a prose work, *Blank Verse: A Guide To Its History And Use.*